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ABSTRACT

This unit, one in a set of teacher-developed materials for elementary geography, emphasizes that children act as geographers in activities that use a classroom as the environment. Exploration and discovery through game playing and maps are the techniques used for instruction as an alternative approach to content teaching by discussion. The first part of the unit provides examples of the geographic perspectives of young people, and the second part suggests three exploration games that can be used to develop geographic awareness. An exploration project is also described that involves discussion questions and a field trip in the students' neighborhoods. A bibliography is included. See SO 009 140 for a general description and explanation of the elementary and secondary sets comprising this series. (Author/ND)

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INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES SERIES IA/E-12

CHILDREN ARE GEOGRAPHERS:

EXPLORATIONS IN SPACE

by

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EDUCATION

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Instead of studying geography, children can be doing geography in the classroom. No special tools are needed, only people. Environments and ways of experiencing them are innumerable and exciting. This paper presents alternatives to the geography of memorizing cities, rivers, and mountains. It suggests changes in content as well as in approach. The first part of the paper provides examples of the geographic perspectives of young people, while the second suggests exploration games that can be used to develop geographic awareness.

Every human being who perceives, explores, experiences, and acts in space is a geographer. Likewise, every stage of life is important in the continuum of human exploration and discovery that stretches from birth to death. Yet we, as adults, do not usually consider the explorations of children as important as those that we undertake. Adults have a habit of thinking of children "... as small creatures in the process of becoming people" (Young, 1966, p.4). It is not the age of the person, nor the mode of his expression that is important in discovery or exploration: Huxley (1971, p.38) has written that "the method of scientific investigation is nothing but the expression of the necessary mode of working of the human mind." Likewise, being a geographer is nothing more than the necessary workings of the human being.

The notion that children are geographers reflects an intriguing paradox, in that it exists as an afterthought. That is, children are too busy exploring and discovering to discuss the process of being geographers, while discussion of the topic seems to be the only approach taken by adults. Thus, to be a child and explorer and to write about childhood and exploration are two distinct things, one is active, the other passive.

The child's geographic activity helps him to know himself, to make others know him, and to interact with the nonhuman world. Children express their geographic awareness in everything that they do, their play with toys, their stories, and poems, and their art work. One needs only to watch intently at home or in the classroom as young children play with blocks and toys to see the modeling of that part of the larger

environment which they have experienced. These seemingly random, nameless masses of blocks are maps, just as are city maps--both of which, incidently, adults have difficulty in reading. But one only needs to place an inadvertent foot amongst the blocks to find out that the apparent unsorted blocks are indeed localized and sorted. "Daddy, you stepped on the gas station."

Since every child is a geographer, it is not surprising to find that their writing and drawing reflect their perception of the environment in which they live. Here, writing and drawing is not meant to be that assigned in social studies classes in school, but that done on their own for their own purposes.

It is important to recognize that there may be significant differences between the responses of children of varying social and cultural environments. A number of authors have found that children from middle-class environments respond to their environments differently than do children from poverty environments (Coles and Piers, 1969; Parr, 1967, p.4.; Dennison, 1969, p.171; Moore, 1969, p.45). Even more fundamental than social and cultural differences is the fact that every child reacts selectively to his surroundings and creates his own world within them (Hanna et al, 1966, p.49).

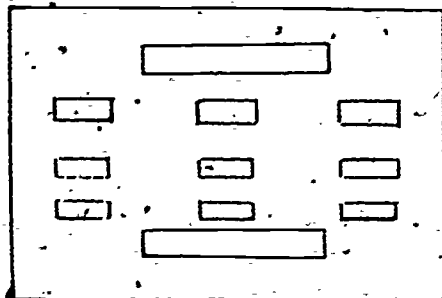
There are many published sources that illustrate the geographic thinking of young people. These include, The World From My Window, collected by George Mendoza; . . . I Never Saw Another Butterfly; Kids (a magazine "by Kids for Kids"); Children of Crisis (3 vols.), Robert Coles; On City Streets, ed. Nancy Larrick; Stuff, Herbert Kohl and Victor Hernandez Cruz; The Me Nobody Knows, Stephen M. Joseph; Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, Kenneth Koch; What Do I Do Monday, John Holt; and "The Child in the Urban Environment: A Review of Literature and Research," O. Fred Donaldson and Robert A. Aldrich. The last three of the sources listed also provide methodologies for incorporating this material in the classroom. It is important to remember that the work presented in these volumes is not that of "special" or "exceptional" children; but ones that are found everywhere. I should add that I am not being "romantic" about children and their abilities, but am simply saying that they can express themselves about the environments in which they live in many ways.

There are a number of games or projects that can be used to open our schools to such exploration and discovery. They all require the interaction of the human senses, thought, and movement. Some examples of these exploration games follow.

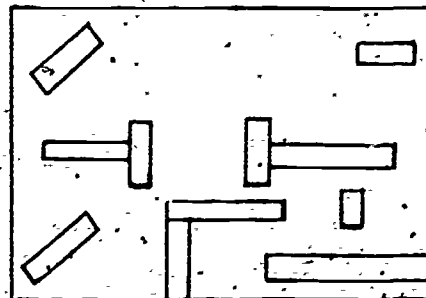
Exploration Game No. 1

This game was developed by Dr. William Bunge. I have used it with both pre-school and university students. It can be played in a school room as done in the example or in any other room.

The teacher tells the players to come to school the following day with a piece of material suitable for a blindfold and paper and pencil.



original room



re-arranged room

Before the students arrive on the day of the game you re-arrange the tables, desks, etc. in the room, pull the shades so that outside light does not enter the room, and place a small radio next to the door through which the students will enter the room. On the day of the game you meet the students outside of the room; do not allow anyone who is going to participate to go in the room. You explain the rules as follows:

1. Each student is to make a map of the room as it is.
2. They are to put on their blindfolds outside of the room, and keep them on while in the room.
3. Paper and pencil are left outside of the room, they can come out as many times as they wish, take off the blindfold and draw on their paper what they "saw."
4. While in the room they walk around and "see" by touching things.
5. They are to listen to the radio to guide themselves back out of the room.

Playing the game attempts to simulate what it might have been like to explore as Columbus. Both the students and Columbus had limited sight capabilities, one sees as far as the telescopic technology of his time the other sees as far as the end of his fingers. Both must navigate, one by stars, the other by radio sound, to find home. They face a common dilemma when "land" is hit. Are they to map the general outlines or do they want to know the details of the coastline. If the latter choice is made, they may find themselves spending much time mapping the details of a dead end. On the other hand, if they choose to be general in their mapping they may miss an important land passage.

Exploration Game No. 2

This game has been adapted from Rachel Carson (1956, p.78-79). In this discovery game the group takes flashlights and/or cameras with flashbulbs out into a field at night to hunt for the individual musicians of the insect orchestra. "The game is to listen, not so much to the full orchestra as to the separate instruments, and try to locate the players" (Carson, 1956, p.78).

Back in the classroom, maps can be made comparing the locations of the various insects and their sounds.

Exploration Game No. 3

This is a somewhat different game modeled after two of the activities suggested by John O. Stevens (1971). Everyone moves silently around a room, a classroom for example. As you move around the room you search for that place where you feel most comfortable and stay there a while. What are your feelings about this place? Why is it special? Now get up and find the spot in the room that is most unlike your first one. How do you feel in this new spot? Why did your feelings change? The language and process might be changed with younger children, but they can still be involved in this type of game whose object is to show that we have different feelings in different places, even in the same room.

Exploration Project No. 4

A fourth project involves the study and exploration of the neighborhoods in which the children live and play, not as seen by the teacher or other adults but by the children themselves. Of course the two views might be compared at the conclusion of the project. Basically the students are asked to express themselves about their neighborhoods. They can do this with poetry, prose, drawing, building, mapping, painting, or taking pictures which they might want to compare with city maps and photos.

Questions such as these might be pursued:

1. What does neighborhood mean to you?
2. How do you feel in it, out of it?
3. How large is it?
4. What is your favorite place in your neighborhood?
5. How do you know where your neighborhood ends and another begins?

These questions and the map can be done in class and followed by field trips into the neighborhoods for comparison and study. This is obviously a very open ended type of project, allowing for creativity on the part of both teacher and students. A project of this type is discussed more fully in: O. Fred Donaldson and George A. Davis, "Geography, Social Action and The Black Community."

There have been three major points in this short essay. First, every human being is a geographer. Secondly, even though there are many published examples of young people's work as geographers, the richest sources of geographic material exist in every classroom. Finally, there are many ways by which exploration and discovery can be brought into the classroom and by which children can be taken out to explore and discover.

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